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A sea of struggle – activist border interventions in the Mediterranean Sea

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ABSTRACT

In October 2014, on the anniversary of a large migrant shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea, activists in Europe and Africa commemorated the victims and protested their deaths by launching the *WatchTheMed Alarm Phone*. The Alarm Phone functions as a 'hotline' for travellers who find themselves in emergency situations when crossing maritime borders towards EUrope. Its shift-teams offer information, advice and the possibility of raising public alarm, also in order to pressurise (state) rescue services to act. Based on my own engagement in the project, I portray an activist network that acted on the desire to intervene more directly in a deadly space that is often considered a 'maritime void' or as 'reserved' for state and EU (border) authorities. I argue that the Alarm Phone's transformative political potentiality arises precisely from its capacity to connect its constitutive engagement in (under the surface) *mobile commons* that facilitate 'unauthorised' human movement with public campaigns that call for and (thereby) perform *international citizenship*.

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Introduction

> April 4th, 1984. Last night to the flicks. All war films. One very good one of a ship full of refugees being bombed somewhere in the Mediterranean. (Orwell 2009, 11)

> We, the uncountable/Doubling each checkerboard square/We pave your sea with bodies/So many you could walk on it/You cannot count us/If you try, we multiply/We children of the horizon/Washing us up, spilling us out. (Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino 2014)

For cross-border travellers, mobile lines of communication have long functioned as help- and orienting devices when moving 'irregularly' in and through unfamiliar spaces and societies. The mobile-phone forms both a community-creating and community-maintaining device, allowing for social connections to relatives, friends, allies and diasporas that bridge distances and transcend contemporary (state) borders that have proven to be particularly rigid for certain individuals, groups and populations. During and after dangerous border crossings, mobile phone-lines become carriers of life signals and signs of survival. A phone gone silent can have several meanings: confiscation or destruction by border authorities

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or smugglers, lack of coverage or credit, loss of the device or even of its carrier's life. When phone calls remain unanswered, imaginations and fears run wild, and for those who have lost all contact with loved ones, a ringing phone can stir up hope and despair, even years later.

Understanding the importance of this technology for contemporary migratory journeys, struggles and communities, a group of freedom of movement activists created a phone-line in solidarity with people on the move and launched the *WatchTheMed Alarm Phone* in October 2014. As a response to the continuous mass dying along EUrope's maritime borders and inspired by the uncountable 'private alarm phones' that exist in the world, the Alarm Phone functions as a tool to listen to and support those moving through dangerous spaces, specifically those of the Mediterranean Sea.[1] It operates day and night and besides offering advice to precarious passengers and the option to make their emergency situations publicly known, it monitors whether authorities respond to distress calls. Since its launch, the phone activists have engaged in more than 1400 distress cases, and were alerted by those in immediate danger, their friends and relatives, and (other) activist allies. Committed to the uncompromised freedom of movement for all, the Alarm Phone has to tread a delicate path, entangled in processes of and discourses on mobility control, increased border surveillance and infrastructure, smuggling, humanitarian rescue rationales and the criminalisation of movement and flight (help).

Direct interventions to support migrants and refugees in the process of crossing EUropean borderzones have become much more common and widespread over the past years and especially so in 2015, when more than one million people are said to have crossed sea borders into EUrope (UNHCR 2015). Besides maritime rescue operations, conducted by actors such as *Médecins Sans Frontières*, *Migrant Offshore Aid Station*, *Sea-Watch, Greenpeace* and *Proactiva Open Arms*, convoys were organised on land that openly offered cross-border transportation, and activist groups travelled along the 'Balkan route' to assist travellers in passing what were oftentimes chaotically and violently reinforced borders. While some of these actors conceive of their practices as being predominantly humanitarian (Stierl, forthcoming), others, including the Alarm Phone and the connected Welcome2Europe network (2016), understand their activism as grounded in the militant tradition and heritage of abolitionism and 'flight help'. They regard themselves as part of an existing transnational 'underground railroad' that supports unauthorised mobility and acts of escape (Stierl 2015; WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2016).

The Alarm Phone, made up of various trans-border and trans-categorical alliances, transcends *activist* and *migrant* signifiers, and is a (constitutive) part of 'mobile commons', 'the space-time of the social life of migrants' (Nyers 2015, 32), worlds of mobile connections and knowledges that often emerge through and are maintained by novel technologies. By realising the potentiality of modern digitalities, the hotline has been able to tap into 'migration […] understood as a multidirectional, dynamic movement, that is, a networked building system facilitated to a great extent by information and communication technologies' (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010, 5). As such, the activist project bridges, or rather collapses the often maintained but erroneous dualism between movements considered 'social/activist' and those considered 'migratory', where the politicality of the former is routinely presumed while the latter's is doubted or ignored. Literatures and theories revolving around collective political action and social movements have long proven to be limited in their ability to analyse the uncountable border struggles and migration mobilisations that we witness in the world today (Stierl 2012). Often remaining within the script of (formal citizen) movements

seeking to achieve particular (visible, audible, countable) political and policy ends, they have been unable to offer an adequate conceptual framework to account for the struggles, the politicality and transformative potential of migratory subjects and communities regularly perceived as unpolitical, marginal and voiceless (Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl 2016).

Two burgeoning literatures have emerged, *Critical Citizenship Studies* (CCS) and the *Autonomy of Migration* (AoM) that have taken up the 'deep challenges [that migration poses] to classic questions about politics: what counts as political activity? who is a member of the political community? who can be considered a political subject?' (Nyers 2015, 24) While both literatures (re-)politicise (the subjects of) migration and have long abandoned migration's reduction to economistic 'push-pull' stereotypes, they have developed a conflictual relationship, at times even operating on presuppositions that their conceptual frameworks are incompatible. Without rehearsing inter-literature debates, I point to the ways in which the Alarm Phone project may provide resources to re-think aspects of these literatures that are routinely understood as being at odds with one another. While not arguing that the significant differences between these literatures can easily be ignored, it seems undeniable that they are underpinned by the shared 'normative concern [to reimagine] political life from the margins' (Moulin and Thomaz 2016). Often holding common 'aims and purposes', as Nyers (2015, 33) has suggested, they both emphasise the significance of migration and its subjects to re-imagine and challenge the nation/state/citizen order of things. Moreover, they both grapple with the ambivalent situation that many migratory subjects 'make claims on the state for rights and recognition, and at the same time are capable of evading legal capture and, indeed, transforming the legal regimes and institutions of state citizenship (Nyers 2015, 25; see also McNevin 2013).'

In this article, I show how the Alarm Phone's (digital) presence in the Mediterranean allows activists to listen to and amplify the *political* struggles that are fought by travelling subjects at sea. Through their interventions in real-time, the activists are able to contest the ways in which the sea is rendered a space of 'nature' or one of 'sovereign prerogative', highly undemocratic and difficult to access for non-state, non-commercial and non-security actors. The Alarm Phone takes part in the 'in/visible struggles of migration' (Ataç et al. 2015) both by facilitating unauthorised human mobility *and* by engaging in public campaigns to denounce border atrocities. I suggest that the Alarm Phone's transformative political potentiality emerges precisely from its ability to become part of existing (under the surface) mobile commons, or 'migrant digitalities' (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos 2014), while *also* enacting 'international citizenship', as evoked by Foucault (1994) in 1981 when he called for solidarity with the Vietnamese boat-people. The struggles of the phone activists as claims to and enactments of international citizenship are grounded in (and constitutive of) mobile commons that in their very manifestation challenge citizenship in its reductive national-legal-settlerist frame. It is through such mobilisation that international citizenship cannot simply be understood as national citizenship 'scaled up', but as something that becomes re-signified and itself 'escapes from border control' (Nyers 2015, 32). As interwoven thought-spaces and lived realities, mobile commons and international citizenship emerge out of solidarities amongst the governed that (ideationally and materially) traverse frontiers and carry seeds to imagine and practice community differently (Isin 2012, forthcoming).

My article is organised in three sections. I first discuss the Mediterranean as a contested political space that, in particular by EUrope's border authorities, is often made to appear as a maritime void. I show that while this discursive strategy serves to deflect responsibility

from EUrope's border practices and in effect depoliticises and naturalises migrant death, mobile-phones have become significant tools to (re-)politicise the sea and migrant vessels as spaces of struggle. The second section provides insights into the Alarm Phone, from its inception up to February 2016, conscious that these can only form preliminary snap-shots as the project and the political situation in maritime borderzones are continuously transforming. As an active member of the project,[2] I sketch the inspirations, trajectories and political mobilisations that led to its emergence and construction. Sub-sections portray three months in 2015 that were particularly significant in shaping the Mediterranean borderzone and thus the work of the phone activists. The third section discusses the ways in which the Alarm Phone, as part of networks of 'migrant digitalities', has been able to connect 'mobile commons struggles' with calls for and enactments of 'international citizenship'.

Imaginaries of the sea and irregularised travel

The Mediterranean Sea is a peculiar borderzone. Despite a long history of human influence on and shaping of this fluid space, imaginaries of the sea as a void, untameable by humankind, return when migrant vessels are concerned, in particular when they capsize and travellers drown. Age-old conceptions of the sea, as evoked by Schmitt (2006, 43), suggest an elemental opposition between land and sea, where the latter has no '*character*, in the original sense of the word, which comes from the Greek *charassein*, meaning to engrave, to scratch, to imprint.' Without 'character', it seemed inherently impossible to draw maritime borders: 'On the open sea, there were no limits, no boundaries, no consecrated sites, no sacred orientations, no law, and no property' (Ibid).

Today, the imaginary of the sea as a space that escapes human imprint and remains 'immaterial' seems at odds with the reality of uncountable vessels criss-crossing the Mediterranean at any given moment. Whether or not we want to go as far as to conceive of the Mediterranean as a 'solid space, crossed at different depths and with different vectors by clearly distinct fluxes of people, goods, information and money' (Boeri 2002), it is clear that commercial, leisure and military activities, assisted by novel satellite technologies, have turned the sea into a busy, highly monitored and controlled space. As Heller and Pezzani (2013, 673) have argued, 'the scopic system assembled to monitor maritime traffic [has meant that] it is no longer true that the sea entirely resists being written.' Moreover, international conventions on the law of the sea have progressively regulated maritime interactions and boundaries, commercial use, as well as Search and Rescue (SAR) obligations of states and seafarers (UNHCR 2006). As Jones (2011, 41) has shown, EUropean policy elites in particular have sought to write, map and govern the sea based on the perception of the Mediterranean as 'an unsettled space with potentially unsettling consequences for 'EU'rope.' It is in this maritime space that the EU 'regards itself as having a natural legitimacy to act in order to ensure its own security, promote good neighbourliness, and stave off potential threats to European and global order (Ibid).' Interventions by border practitioners, who regard the sea as a space of challenge and experimentation, have reinforced this process of 'EUropeanising' the Mediterranean. In order to govern these fluid borders that 'become elastic, and proliferate through their geographical dispersal' (Mountz and Hiemstra 2012, 456), EUrope's border agency Frontex deemed new forms of border management necessary (Vaughan-Williams 2008; Kasparek 2009). Following Frontex (2016), due to EUrope's 'long and varied' southern coastline where 'different areas [are] being targeted by irregular

migrants at different times', the policing of EUrope's maritime spaces would require cooperation amongst the '50 separate authorities […] active in maritime surveillance' and an especially flexible strategy, indeed a 'multi-agency approach [that] extends to areas as diverse as illegal fishing, pollution and drug trafficking.'

Considering these varied acts of human imprinting on and shaping of the Mediterranean Sea, it seems untenable that imaginaries of the sea as void should persist. However, this is precisely the case when migrant vessels are concerned. In popular and mediatised imaginaries of sea-crossings, the livelihood of travellers is regularly reduced to the interplay between the vessel, the (physical) constitution of travellers and the biophysical forces at work in the sea: the current, the cold, the winds and the waves. Baring these forces, the sea becomes emptied out, it seems primordial, devoid of politics as if, indeed, '[o]n the waves, there is nothing but waves' (Schmitt 2006, 42–43). When vessels enter such seemingly 'antithetical' space to that of land and carry a freight often itself conceptualised as a natural force, the migrant wave-stream-flood-tsunami, their movement, capsizing or disappearance can easily be naturalised and connected to registers of fate, dissociated from human action and accountability. As William Walters points out, there seems to exist the potential for maritime spaces to always be turned into an (imagined) void:

> [H]owever much the ocean may have been striated by the modern forces of commerce, geopolitics and international law, however much it has been rendered predictable, navigable, exploitable, etc. by these interventions, there exist circumstances under which the ancient idea of the high sea as a lawless space beyond sovereignty and justice is capable of being reactivated. (2008, 5)

This observation is particularly pertinent with regard to discourses surrounding migratory movements at sea, as the saga of the so-called 'ghost ships' exemplifies. In early 2015, the *Blue Sky M* with about 750 travellers on board was one of three large cargo vessels that was said to have been abandoned by its crew, with engines running, steering towards the Italian coast, doomed to crash if it was not for Italian border authorities who intervened. Frontex and other migration managers, including the IOM and the UNHCR, were quick to denounce these 'ghost ships' as novel trends in smuggling, supposedly signalling a 'new level of cruelty' (Euronews 2015). While Frontex later admitted that their judgement was based on flawed evidence (Buchen 2015), the initial evocation of the ghostly migrant vessel spread like wildfire throughout the world-wide media, intended to 'conjure folkloric and mythological imaginary, [suggesting] that its cargo is deeply threatening', portraying 'migration routes and trajectories as somewhat mysterious, without corporeal origin: an image of people set adrift without history or narrative (Baird, Spijkerboer, and Cuttitta 2015).'

These imaginaries cannot simply be understood as folkloric remains but as (discursive) strategies that, indeed, re-*activate* the sea as a lawless space to serve as a 'moral alibi' (Doty 2011; Squire 2014). If the Mediterranean appears as a maritime void where shipwrecks and disappeared passengers form quasi-natural catastrophes, EUrope's principal fault in the mass dying lies merely in its passivity. Humanitarian gestures of EUropean leaders in the aftermath of mass shipwrecks that promise more 'active' (rescue) engagements (Stierl 2016) deflect from the fact that 'the Mediterranean has been made to kill through contemporary forms of militarized governmentality of mobility which inflict deaths by first creating dangerous conditions of crossing, and then abstaining from assisting those in peril (Heller and Pezzani 2014, 659).' While, currently, mass rescue operations are regularly conducted by coastguards and cargo vessels, unaccountability and impunity at sea widely persist and with

it the (sovereign) ability to re-activate the sea as a deadly void. As Bigo (2015, 58) argues, contemporary security actors have fostered the idea of the sea as an inherently dangerous place: 'They all refuse to accept that it has become dangerous because of the way they have managed illegality and try to naturalize the deaths resulting from this contradictory form of management as if death was related to the natural elements.' The 'dangerous sea' persists also due to the fact that contemporary border control regimes conflict or trump international maritime conventions. Not only do '[t]ensions and inconsistencies arise from the simultaneous applicability of sets of rules originating in international human rights law, refugee law, EU immigration regulations and the law of the sea' (Amnesty International 2014, 27), the (humanitarian) law of the sea, as Klepp shows (2011, 555), 'is ignored or modified according to political considerations and the manoeuvres of the coastal state governments that dominate the situation at sea.' Moreover, even 'legally binding SAR regulations […] are put in question by the explosive political nature of sea migration in the Mediterranean' and 'criminally liable misconduct of security forces against boat migrants at sea is difficult to prove, incidents which result in fatalities are rarely sanctioned (2011, 556).'

Besides serving as moral alibi, processes of 'naturalising' irregularised sea-migration bereave travelling subjects of their politicality. They are, as suggested by Bharati Mukherjee (quoted in Marciniak and Tyler 2014, 8), rendered 'simultaneously *invisible* and *over-exposed*', constituting overdetermined figures both as those already-missing and in need of humanitarian generosity. However, as the following sections show, migrant vessels are places of contestation that carry subjects who enact their right to leave, move, survive and arrive. In order to understand the vehicle as 'a site of political action', Walters (2015, 472, 481) calls for 'an account of migration that is much thicker with things and their entanglements with humans.' One of those 'things' through which (the subjects of) migration struggles at sea become politicised, is the phone. Be it the simple mobile-phone commonly carried by (Sub-Saharan) migrants crossing the Strait of Gibraltar, the satellite phone often kept on vessels leaving from Libya, or the modern smart-phone that accompanies most journeys in the Aegean Sea: their ability to carry voices, information and signs of survival audibilises the political struggles that take place even in the bleakest of spaces, at times able to counter the reactivation of the sea as a void and deterrent, beyond justice and democracy.

The WatchTheMed Alarm Phone

Before his departure from Libya in October 2013, Dr. Mohanad Jammo saved the number of the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) on his phone, just in case. He was among hundreds of travellers seeking to cross the Mediterranean. Still in Libyan waters, the group was attacked by a vessel flying the Berber flag. They escaped but water started to enter the vessel through bullet holes (WatchTheMed 2013a). When in acute distress, Dr. Jammo made use of the satellite phone on board and reached out to the Italian authorities:

> [The officer] said to me: *you are in an area due to the Maltese forces, not to us. You have to call the Maltese navy*. I said to him please we are dying. [...] *You can call the Maltese forces and I will give you the number now: 00356* … (Gatti 2013)

Due to quarrels between the MRCC Rome and the Armed Forces of Malta over the question of whose responsibility it would be to intervene, a rescue operation was not immediately launched. Moreover, no vessel in the vicinity directed itself to the passengers in need. The vessel sank and more than 260 people drowned, including Dr. Jammo's two children. His

repeated calls meant that the deaths could not be ascribed to the biophysical forces of the sea alone but were directly related to the failure of border authorities. Despite accounts of survivors, clearly demonstrating the consequential conflicts between the authorities, neither Malta nor Italy launched investigations in the aftermath of the shipwreck (Gatti 2013; WatchTheMed 2013a; Amnesty 2014). In 2014, on the anniversary of the shipwreck, the Alarm Phone (2014) began its work and asked: 'What would have happened if the boat-people could have directed a second call to an independent phone-hotline through which a team of civil society members could raise alarm and put immediate pressure on authorities to rescue?'

At the time of writing, the activist hotline is operated by roughly 120 members, located in 12 countries and on 3 continents. At any point in time, shift-teams stand ready to answer emergency calls and can, if need be, immediately reach out to multilingual and regional experts for assistance. The Alarm Phone emerged out of years, sometimes decades, of no-border and anti-racist struggles in Europe and Africa, and required the collectivisation of individuals, activist and migrant groups. Various (migrant) activist initiatives connected to form an assemblage of capabilities, bringing together expertise from different border regions.[3] Members of the monitoring platform WatchTheMed (2012) had long envisioned a non-sovereign presence at sea to counter states' quasi-impunity, by visibilising practices of maritime abandonment and 'pushing-back'. The platform, created by Pezzani and Heller, used testimonies of survivors and sensing technologies to re-create sea journeys that had ended in catastrophe, such as the infamous 'Left-to-Die boat' of 2011 and the shipwreck of 2013, described above (WatchTheMed 2013b). Through the Alarm Phone, the documentation of human rights violations after the fact turned into a border intervention in real-time. The creation of this network was inspired and supported by the Eritrean priest Father Mussie Zerai whose mobile-phone had long formed a private alarm phone, '[circulated] among Europe-bound Africans like a Mediterranean 911' (Schwartz 2014). Also those who had once successfully crossed maritime borders significantly contributed to the project by re-counting their embodied experiences, providing crucial insights into how sea-crossings are organised, carried out, and felt (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2016).

In several months of preparation, concise emergency handbooks were written, shift-teams trained and distress situations rehearsed. Each handbook focussed on one of the three Mediterranean borderzones: the Western and Central Mediterranean and the Aegean seas. Besides meteorological and geographical conditions, levels of maritime traffic and capacities of national coastguards differ considerably in these zones. Moreover, tactics, modes and materialities of irregularised travelling and their governance vary, so that context-specific and adaptable emergency plans had to be designed. Uncountable questions were raised and answered: What should those in immediate danger be asked first and what advice can one possibly give? What are the crucial pieces of information that need to be passed on to rescue agencies and how can we ensure that our contact persons will remain anonymous and do not face criminalisation?

When the activists announced their project in the summer of 2014, they found widespread endorsement. Despite the Italian military-humanitarian operation Mare Nostrum, the mass drowning had not been halted: 3400 deaths were counted by the end of the year. The call for support was signed by survivors of shipwrecks, including Dr. Jammo, relatives of those who disappeared during their journeys, African and European associations supporting refugees and migrants, investigative journalists and seafarers, academics and

philosophers such as Étienne Balibar and Antonio Negri, artists including Nobel Laureate Elfriede Jelinek, as well as former UN Special Rapporteur Jean Ziegler (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2014). The unusual breadth of support for this campaign signalled that the time was ripe to move beyond political mobilisations after the fact, after bodies disappeared in the sea or were washed up along coastlines, and towards a direct intervention, unwilling to accept EUrope's lip-service in the aftermath of shipwrecks any longer. With its launch, the Alarm Phone number began to circulate, digitally and through word-of-mouth campaigns in non/EUropean migrant and activist communities.

February 2015 – unprecedented movements, emergent fantasies

On the 15th of February, one week after yet another Mediterranean shipwreck with more than 300 lives lost, I was part of the Alarm Phone shift-team when we were, as so often, contacted by Father Zerai (Alarm Phone 2015a). He knew of hundreds of passengers on two vessels who had left the coast of Libya in the early morning and were now, at around noon, in a situation of emergency and urgently asked for rescue. With coordinates at hand we located them near the Libyan coast. Our attempts to reach the travellers through the provided satellite phone numbers were unsuccessful. In exchanges with MRCC Rome, it became clear that there were many more, up to twelve vessels in distress in the waters north of Libyan shores. On digital vessel tracking sites we followed the circling movements of various coastguard and cargo vessels, indications of ongoing rescue missions.

We tried, again and again, to reach the passengers but the line remained quiet. At the same time, news stories began to emerge, first in the Italian media, then Europe- and world-wide. Following accounts of Italian authorities, more than one thousand people were in distress and various vessels in the vicinity were ordered to conduct rescue operations. What dominated the headlines, beside the staggering number of people seeking to cross the sea so early in the year, was an incident that was said to have taken place during one of the rescue operations. An Italian coastguard vessel had just concluded a transfer of distressed travellers onto their vessel when four 'Kalashnikov-wielding men' (BBC News 2015) approached and demanded the return of the now empty vessel. Presumed to be the smugglers, they boarded the vessel and took off with it, causing an outcry in Italy with several politicians calling for a military intervention along the Libyan coast. Frontex later referred to the incident as posing 'a new threat that requires reflection. We need to speak to member states and Italian authorities about how to handle this situation (Muscat 2015).'

In the middle of the night, MRCC Rome confirmed to us that rescue operations were concluded with all vessels, including 'our' two, detected and 2164 travellers rescued. They would be disembarked in various Italian harbours. In the following days, anti-migrant sentiments and populist political rhetoric soared, disseminated through the mainstream media: Europe was repeatedly suggested to be under siege and at its limits of hospitality. Vessels were now not merely portrayed as precarious carriers of those racialised as always-other or as pandemic-inducing time bombs, 'Trojan horses of Ebola' (Iaccino 2014). The forceful (re-)seizure of the smuggling vessel seemed to signal a novel dimension of threat and sparked the imagination of anti-migrant prone politicians and journalists. The sea migration-security nexus was extended to include the potential transportation of 'ISIS terror' into Europe, necessitating tough and *pre-emptive* border control measures. Implicitly or explicitly suggesting a military intervention in Libyan territory, stopping the departure of

migrant vessels would eradicate the phenomenon of migrant deaths, Kalashnikov-wielding men, Ebola contamination or ISIS infiltration altogether.

It was maybe on that day in February that a military intervention *within* Libya as a direct response to Mediterranean migration movements was envisioned for the first time. In March, in the aftermath of the attack at the Bardo National Museum in Tunisia with 21 fatalities, committed by two gunmen said to have been trained in Libya, Italy launched the 1000 sailors strong operation Mare Sicuro (Safe Seas) in the Mediterranean and along Libyan waters, considered both an anti-terrorism and anti-trafficking operation. Ideas of an 'iron curtain' off the coast of Libya emerged and with increasing maritime movements in the following months and rising political tensions in North Africa, what first appeared to be a desperate plea and fantasy from the political right turned into a EUropean policy proposal and then into the EU naval operation 'Eunavfor Med'.

April 2015 – maritime mass suffering

On the 10th of April, the Alarm Phone launched its first public pressure campaign, determined to prompt Italian coastguards to conduct a rescue operation in the Mediterranean (Alarm Phone 2015b). Following Father Zerai, a vessel with about 600 passengers had left Libya in the morning. Our shift-team reached out and it emerged in several direct phone conversations with the travellers that they required urgent support. While taking note of the vessel's coordinates and information about the emergency situation, the Italian authorities remained reluctant to confirm whether or not an operation would be launched. With time passing, the situation became increasingly dramatic: water began to enter the vessel, the engine broke down, and panic spread on board. When, hours later, rescue was still not in sight and the MRCC Rome remained unwilling to cooperate, the Alarm Phone kept its promise to pressurise and control EUrope's border controllers and started a snowballing social media campaign by asking the public to demand a rescue mission. In response to dozens of emails, the MRCC Rome denounced the campaign as potentially interfering with their coordination of SAR missions but, at last, confirmed that rescue vessels would be directed to the travellers in distress. Only two days later, the Alarm Phone faced an unprecedented situation:

> The first emergency call from the Central Mediterranean Sea reaches the Alarm Phone at 7:40 am. By the late afternoon the shift teams are in contact via satellite phones with refugees on nine vessels. GPS data is received, updated and forwarded to coastguards. Remaining in contact with the passengers is crucial: our teams frequently pass on information, calm down and encourage them. Most importantly, our teams repeatedly call the coastguards and build up pressure until rescue operations are confirmed. On this day, these practices succeed with regards to all nine vessels. A case on such large scale has not been experienced before by this transnational solidarity project. (Alarm Phone 2015c)

On that day alone, 3791 travellers were rescued from vessels in distress. Between the 10th and 13th of April, about 8480 people were rescued (Alarm Phone 2015d). The relief felt by Alarm Phone members after a challenging weekend with what seemed to have been successful rescue operations vanished immediately when, after disembarkation, some survivors recounted how their vessel had capsized and left about 400 people dead in the water. On the 16th of April, another 53 fatalities were recorded. Then, three days later, presumably more than 820 travellers drowned. Within merely one week in April, more than 1250 people had

passed away at sea, raising the year's death toll to more than 1800 *known* deaths, the highest ever recorded toll at this early point in the year.

EUrope seemed stunned, even outraged. Besides displaying populist gestures of humanitarian sorrow, as in previous disasters at sea, the EU and its member states also announced determined steps to respond to the 'Mediterranean migration crisis'. On the 20th of April, the Joint Foreign and Home Affairs Council of the EU released a 10 point action plan that, extraordinarily, announced the reinforcement of policies of deterrence, furthering both the militarisation of the maritime borderzone as well as the externalisation of border controls with the aim to pre-empt attempts to embark on sea journeys. The mandate and operational areas of Frontex, an agency openly rejecting to be understood as a SAR agency, would be extended; smuggler networks would be targeted in a 'systematic effort to capture and destroy [their] vessels'; member states and EU agencies would 'ensure fingerprinting of all migrants' and 'establish a new return programme for rapid return of irregular migrants'; cooperation with third countries would be intensified and immigration liaison officers employed there 'to gather intelligence on migratory flows' (European Commission 2015). While extended surveillance of maritime spaces had also been promised and (temporarily) enacted in the aftermath of previous shipwrecks, EUrope's action plan signalled the launch of a hitherto unparalleled concerted effort against smuggling networks. What seemed a farfetched fantasy in February took shape in April. Responding to EUrope's plan, the Alarm Phone (2015e, 2015f) proposed its own action plan, entitled 'Ferries not Frontex! 10 points to really end the deaths of migrants at sea':

> The history of the last 20 years in the Mediterranean shows that stepping up the militarization of migration routes is only cause to more death. Each and every time a route into Europe has been blocked by new surveillance technologies and increasing policing, migrants have not stopped arriving. They have simply been forced to take longer and more dangerous routes. […] Smuggling networks would be history in no time if those who now die at sea could instead reach Europe legally. The visa regime that prevents them from doing so was introduced only 25 years ago.

Denouncing EUrope's action plan as merely seeking to displace EUrope's border violence, the Alarm Phone outlined a radically different vision of Mediterranean space, one of trans-border exchange and community, characterised by the slogan 'Ferries not Frontex':

> We know that no process of externalisation of asylum procedures and border control, no amount of compliance with the legal obligations to rescue, no increase in surveillance and militarization will stop the mass dying at sea. In the immediate terms, all we need is legal access and ferries. Will the EU and international agencies be ready to take these steps, or will civil society have to do it for them? (Alarm Phone 2015f)

June 2015 – border militarisation

In June, the Alarm Phone dealt with about 40 emergency cases in all regions of the Mediterranean. Groups of travellers seeking to cross the Strait of Gibraltar contacted the hotline the most often but were, more often than not, intercepted by the Moroccan Navy and returned to Morocco, leaving the phone activists only to 'wish them the strength to overcome the sea in their next attempt' (Alarm Phone 2015g). Interceptions were also witnessed in the Aegean Sea, when two large groups of Syrian travellers informed the hotline activists that they were being chased by Turkish authorities (Alarm Phone 2015h, 2015i). In both instances, travellers pointed to threatening behaviour of Turkish security actors who

fired gun shots in the air, forcing them to halt and be returned. Moreover, people on board of twelve vessels in distress in the Central Mediterranean contacted the hotline, eleven of which were rescued, while the fate of one group remains unknown (Alarm Phone 2015j). In many of these emergency situations, shift-teams would not merely inform state authorities but also alert a 'civilian fleet' that, based on humanitarian rescue rationales, had formed their own border interventions (Stierl, forthcoming). Through direct contact to crews sent to the Mediterranean by MOAS, MSF and Sea-Watch, the hotline activists were now able to turn to non-state actors and thereby challenge the monopoly of state authorities in this borderzone (Alarm Phone 2015k).

On the 22nd, the EU launched its naval operation 'Eunavfor Med' aiming 'to identify, capture and dispose of vessels and enabling assets used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers (European Council 2015).' Focussing on 'surveillance and assessment of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean', phase one prepared phase two, the 'seizure of suspicious vessels', and phase three, 'the disposal of vessels and related assets, preferably before use, and to apprehend traffickers and smugglers' (Ibid). The military mission, revealed by WikiLeaks about a month earlier, seemed the logical next step to enact February's fantasy and April's action plan. While the realisation of phase three is currently more than questionable, the envisioned destruction of vessels *before* use and the apprehension of those involved in the business of people smuggling, necessitating the mobilisation of large-scale military assets and the employment of military forces on the ground and/or along the shores of Libya, signalled a new dimension of EUropean maritime militarisation (EU External Action 2015). Cautiously framing the operation in humanitarian terms, its proponents showed awareness that such aggressive campaign and the tacitly accepted 'collateral casualties' (ECRE 2015) could seriously damage the EU's reputation. The EU Military Committee (quoted in WikiLeaks 2015, 8, 9) thus recommended an 'information strategy from the outset' in order to 'facilitate expectation management' and counter the 'risk to EU reputation linked to any perceived transgression by the EU force through any public misinterpretation of its tasks and objectives, or the potential negative impact should loss of life be attributed, correctly or incorrectly, to action or inaction by the EU force.'

To date, it is difficult to estimate whether or not EUrope's military intervention, now rebranded 'Sophia' after the name of a baby born during a rescue operation, factored into the marked decrease of sea-crossings through the Central Mediterranean following the summer months. In any case, unauthorised mobilities opened corridors of escape elsewhere, mainly in the Aegean Sea, through which hundreds of thousands crossed. In the autumn and winter of 2015, the Alarm Phone did not stop ringing. In hundreds of emergency cases, those in immediate distress at sea or after stranding on the many Greek islands were supported through ever-growing solidarity networks of (migrant) activists. While most survived their dangerous journeys, some experienced violent attacks and push-back operations at sea, and others, more than ever before, lost their lives in this borderzone (Alarm Phone 2015l).

Forming mobile commons, enacting international citizenship

In 1981, at a press conference in Geneva, and as part of the inauguration of the *Comité International contre la Piraterie*, Foucault read out a statement in which he voiced solidarity with the Vietnamese boat-people who were targeted by pirates when fleeing Vietnam,

left without protection by the international community. Therein, Foucault (1994, 707, 708; translated by Gordon 2015a) stated: 'We are here only as private individuals and with no other claim to speak, and to speak together, except a certain difficulty we share in enduring what is taking place.' He rhetorically wondered: So who asked us to speak? to state: 'No one, and that is exactly our entitlement (Gordon 2015a).' Foucault argued:

> There exists an international citizenship which as such has its rights and duties, and which is obliged to stand up against all forms of abuse of power, no matter who commits them, no matter who are their victims. After all, we are all governed, and, by that fact, joined in solidarity. (Ibid)

He declared that the obligation of this international citizenry would be to protest people's misfortunes and assign responsibility to governments. These misfortunes, he held, should never 'be allowed to remain the silent residue of politics' but, to the contrary, they would '[ground] an absolute right to stand up and to challenge those who hold power (Ibid).' The task would be to mobilise this new right and intervene in the 'order of international politics and strategies', thereby wresting the monopoly to engage in such politics from governments that seek to reserve that right for themselves (Ibid). In his discussion of Foucault's statement, Gordon (2015b) notes that 'Foucault is not re-theorising existing conceptions of existing citizenship roles and relationships, within a state or political society' but, rather, 'inventing something more like a counter-citizenship' or a 'supplementary citizenship' which 'have no precondition, and are not conditional on any prior event of conferral or permission.'

Foucault's words reverberate throughout the Alarm Phone project. As a trans-border solidarity coalition, not commissioned by anyone, it responded to the plight at sea by intervening in a space seemingly reserved for sovereign actors. Not wanting to endure what was taking place anymore – mass suffering and loss at sea – the phone activists began to engage in struggles over in/visibility and in/audibility by creating a direct line of communication, enabling them to listen to and support the *political* struggles in maritime spaces. These intrusions exert democratic control 'on the controllers of borders', as called for by Balibar (2002, 85), and thereby seek to counter sovereign impunity and the reactivation of the Mediterranean as a lawless space. It is productive to conceive of Alarm Phone politics as an embodiment of international (counter-)citizenship, engaged in what Isin has referred to as 'acts of citizenship' (2008, 39) where subjects do not need to be 'authorised' by sovereign powers to *claim* and *perform* (citizenship) rights, protection and movement. For Isin (forthcoming), and following Foucault, the 'subject that comes into being by making rights claim 'I, we, they, have a right to' is the subject of the international and it is this subject that shows solidarity, risks confrontation, and acts through traversing borders.'

It is in this sense that Alarm Phone activism allows us to conceive of acts of (international) citizenship and mobile commons (and by, arguably, extension CCS and AoM) not as antagonistic but complementary concepts. While grounding their practices of assigning responsibility for maritime suffering to EUropean governments and institutions in the belief that 'solidarity across borders is our obligation as members of the international community of the governed' (Isin, forthcoming), the phone activists are *also* part of the (digital) struggles and unruly movements that often escape the dominant gaze of EUrope's border regime. Even if the Alarm Phone's public campaigns form acts of international citizenship that are 'conceived within, and address themselves to a world of states' (Gordon 2015b), they clearly also move beyond sovereign scripts and perceptibilities through their ability to become part of 'an underground world of knowledge', characteristic of mobile commons:

> People on the move create a world of knowledge, of information, of tricks for survival, of mutual care, of social relations, of services exchange, of solidarity and sociability that can be shared, used and where people contribute to sustain and expand it. (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 190)

The Alarm Phone is part of 'migrant digitalities', pivotal for contemporary irregularised migration projects and their capacity to enact the 'right to escape' (Mezzadra 2004). For example, in dozens of emergency cases in the Central Mediterranean, activists were able to charge satellite phones of travellers in distress. The available function to upload credit onto these phones via the Internet, merely by knowing the correct phone number, enabled shift-teams to guarantee that travellers were still able to reach out, even in cases where no direct contact between the Alarm Phone and them could ever be established. Whoever they were calling, relatives, friends or coastguards, continuously decreasing credit formed signs of life and hope. Moreover, when maritime border crossings shifted significantly to the waters between Turkey and Greece, the activists were notified to more than 1000 distress cases in the Aegean Sea alone, predominantly through novel forms of communication technology, including Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber. As one Alarm Phone member notes:

> One of the main reasons for this incredibly high number of calls to us is the immense level of communication within communities of travellers. Especially Syrian activists built a strong communication-net to make sea-trips safer. […] Smartphones became one of the most important life-saving instruments for these journeys, as they allow users to quickly pass on GPS positions. Very rapidly, the different networks of people on the move and activist groups found each other, forming novel ties and collaborations. (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2016, 103)

Coordinates, pictures, videos or (recorded voice) messages can be passed on directly from precarious vessels or through uncountable contact persons and activist allies situated throughout the globe, allowing shift-teams, themselves often connected through Skype and other digital devices, to respond to distress situations. After successful sea crossings and arrival in Greece, and in case of sustained contact between shift-teams and travellers, directions for further movement can be passed on, for example the info guides of Welcome2Europe (2016). In its anniversary brochure, the Alarm Phone re-printed a WhatsApp conversations between an activist and a traveller which began in a moment of urgent distress and panic at sea, and then continued after safe arrival on Lesvos, during tiring registration processes, a subsequent ferry journey to Athens, when arriving in Vienna and when being intercepted by the German police, and, eventually, after arrival in a small German village (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2016, 73).

It is through these (digital) border struggles and (temporary) solidarities formed within *and* beyond the gaze of governmental border authorities that the Alarm Phone supports the ways in which 'mobile subjects *perform* or *act* 'rights of way' or 'rights of passage' […] which can be clandestine, informal and not recognized by law [but are] de facto present and operational (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos 2014, 35).' Part of these mobile commons and supporting the struggles of those moving for *whatever-reason*, at the (always-already blurred) intersections between unruly mobilities and citizenship, the Alarm Phone is able to amplify the political claims to international citizenship that are enacted in movement and enunciated in distress calls from the sea. Subjects of escape and those in solidarity with them enact international citizenship by performing their right to move, cross, survive and arrive as well as by challenging and assigning responsibility to governments. It is exactly in these enacted solidarities between subjects of border-crossing and those of flight-help,

always-already unstable signifiers, that novel communities come into being, invented in the struggle to traverse borders.

Conclusion

> Europe! Can you not
> hear love calling out from the
> bottom of the sea?
> (Le monde n'est pas rond 2014)

Sometimes, calls from the sea need to be translated. Several members of the Alarm Phone speak languages often used on today's migrant vessels – Arabic, Farsi, Tigrinya, or French – and are thus able to translate and pass on information to others who may be able to assist. The activist hotline functions as a translator or interpreter also in another, less direct sense. Following Balibar (2002, 85), possibilities to radically democratise borderzones '[depend] on the question of *who* will meet in those unliveable places', and, 'in order to meet, one most often needs interpreters, mediators.' From deep within unliveable maritime borderzones, the Alarm Phone interprets distress calls, often conceived as mere pleas of desperation, as what they also constitute: expressions of political struggle and subjectivity, rights claims and enactments of international citizenship.

Unsurprisingly, border subversions and their activist support face sovereign counter-measures. Besides the long-standing illegalisation of unauthorised border-crossing, practices of flight-help have come under greater scrutiny. In its 'conclusions on migrant smuggling', the Council of the European Union (2016) not only proposed to narrow or even erase legal distinctions between 'trafficking' and 'smuggling' but also did not exempt 'humanitarian assistance' from being charged for engaging such 'criminal' practices. Furthermore, the Council 'invited the Commission' to '[ensure] a mapping exercise is executed on the ways in which social media are used for the purpose of migrant smuggling (Council of the European Union 2016, 6; Statewatch 2016).' These attempts to trace and monitor 'mobile commons communications', recent persecutions against Greek volunteers, as well as the novel requirement that volunteers and NGOs on Greek islands have to register with the police, demonstrate the desire of EUrope's governments and institutions to regain sovereign prerogatives and impunity in maritime borderzones.

Against these attempts to re-activate the sea as a space of unaccountable human loss, the Alarm Phone has created a contentious presence in the Mediterranean Sea, able to listen to, translate and amplify calls emanating from migrant vessels. The activists know that the hotline is not a solution. They want to create a Mediterranean space of free movement, exchange and solidarity, and make such an emergency phone-line unnecessary. But, for the time being, even deep in maritime spaces, the ringing of a phone continues to be a sign of stubborn survival and, possibly, a wake-up call for EUrope.

Notes

1. This paper speaks of 'EUrope' throughout. In this way it seeks to problematise frequently employed usages that equate the EU with Europe and Europe with the EU and suggests, at the same time, that EUrope is not reducible to the institutions of the EU.

2. I have been involved in the Alarm Phone project from the outset. As an active member I have been, and continue to be, involved in phone shifts, public protest campaigns as well as the writing and translation of reports and political statements, some of which I will refer to in this article. As a proponent of 'militant research' practices in 'migration/border studies', I regard this engagement, *inter alia*, as an attempt 'to scrutinize and counteract the paradigm of an all-encompassing governance of mobility and to unpack the fantasies this paradigm entails and engenders' (Garelli and Tazzioli 2013, 247).
3. Groups that formed the Alarm Phone collective included: WatchTheMed, Boats4People, Welcome2Europe, Afrique-Europe-Interact, Borderline-Europe, No Borders Morocco, Forschungsgesellschaft Flucht und Migration, and Voix des Migrants.

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